



Title	The Brazilian Belle Époque : New Ideas, Old Paradigms
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Citation	大阪大学世界言語研究センター論集. 2011, 6, p. 1-16
Version Type	VoR
URL	https://hdl.handle.net/11094/7890
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The Brazilian *Belle Époque*: New Ideas, Old Paradigms¹

DEZEM Rogério Akiti *

Abstract :

The objective of this article is to present how Brazilian intellectuals *fin-de-siècle* (1870-1914) reflected on topics like race and *nation* in their debates about the construction of a modern Brazil. It was the elite's responsibility to build this discourse, but, should they seek for examples in Europe (France)? Or should they build their "own model" of nation? Besides, the approach of end of slavery and the need of workers for the coffee farming, sparked debates about the validity, or not, of bringing immigrants of the "yellow race" (Chinese and Japanese) to Brazil. New ideas and old paradigms clashed in this historical moment, creating ambiguous discourses about the Brazilian people at that time. How could they solve this "national enigma"?

Keywords : Brazilian Belle Époque, Modernization, Racism, Immigration.

L'oubli, et je dirai même l'erreur historique, est un facteur essentiel de la création d'une nation.
(Forgetting, and I would even say historical error, is an essential element in the creation of a nation)

(*Qu'est-ce que 'une nation?* Ernest Renan, 1882)

1. Between pessimism and inaccessibility.

Fin-de-siècle Brazil was not immune from the transformations occurring in Europe, having been uniquely affected by the changes in the transition from the 19th to the 20th century. This period, named the *Belle Époque* (1870-1914), takes us to a universe where certainties were the order of the day, with the rapid technological development creating a society of "unlimited dreams."²

In this reality full of paradoxes, where electricity and speed, progress and civilization became transient elements in a period where the notions of time and space began to change radically,³ the

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1 A abridged version of this article was first published in Portuguese (March 2011).

2 COSTA, A.C.; SCHWARCZ, L.M. *1890-1914: no tempo das certezas [1890-1914: IN THE TIME OF CERTAINTIES]*. São Paulo, Cia. Das Letras, 2000. p. 25.

3 Ibidem, p. 17.

idea of progress connected to science gave rise to an era of *-isms*, seeking to explain, classify and, if necessary, to *correct* everything. Together with the fast development of some European nations, such as England, France and Germany, this historic time was also known in Brazil as the “hegemonic period of racial thought,” as the racialist theories imported from Europe supported the explanation of the “differences” between human beings.

A contemporary of those transformations, German sociologist Georg Simmel (1858-1918) wrote that science, which was in development in that period, was a temporary shelter to problems that were in the air, thus attracting all the “lost souls” of the scientific area.⁴ To the naivety of many, science became the “holder of the truth,” a truth that was protected and that, in light of the *progress*, made man its manipulator. This frame of mind was expressed in the words of the obscure French chemist Marcellin Berthelot, who said in 1887: “For science, from now on there is no mystery about the universe.”⁵

“Novelty” was the order of the day, giving rise for the need to adjust the *modus pensanti* of the fashionable philosophies and theories of the Old Continent to the Brazilian reality, so that Brazil (considered “backward”) could be adjusted to the same rhythm of what we may call as the “age of certainties.” In order to start this process, as a matter of urgency, in accordance with the emerging Brazilian *intelligentsia* of the day, it was important that Brazil overcame its cultural backwardness “accelerating its evolutionary pace,” so that it could attain “the most advanced part of Humankind.”⁶ Rio de Janeiro – due to its natural vocation, and being the capital of the country to be “regenerated” – emerged as the main center responsible for propagating the innovative ideas of the *Belle Époque* in Brazil. In the eyes of the *Republicans themselves* (regardless of the Republican trend followed, if liberal or positivist), the Republican government model implemented in the country in 1889 would represent the modernity capable of freeing the young Brazilian nation from the “lethargy of monarchy” and the “barbarism of slavery.” With this intent, new symbols were created for “a new Brazil”: anthems, flags, heroes and models were replaced (or had their meanings changed), aiming to mark the *difference*⁷ and reduce the country’s backwardness in relation to Europe, in an attempt to be similar to it.

For the Brazilian society of the late 19th century, the intellectuals discussed for the first time

4 SIMMEL, Georg. “Como as formas sociais se mantém” [HOW SOCIAL FORMS ARE MAINTAINED]. In: MORAES FILHO, E.M. (org.). Simmel – Sociologia [SIMMEL – SOCIOLOGY], v. 34. São Paulo, Ática, 1983.p. 46.

5 LENTIN, Jean Pierre. *Penso, logo me engano* [JE PENSE, DONC JE ME TROMPE]. São Paulo, Ática, 1996. p. 39.

6 SALIBA, Elias T. *Raízes do riso. A representação humorística na História brasileira :da Belle Époque aos primeiros tempos do rádio* [ROOTS OF LAUGHTER. THE HUMORISTIC REPRESENTATION IN BRAZILIAN HISTORY: FROM BELLE ÉPOQUE TO THE FIRST DAYS OF THE RADIO]. São Paulo, Cia. Das Letras, 2002. p. 34.

7 COSTA, A.C.; SCHWARCZ, L.M. op. cit., p. 27.

a portrait of the paradoxical situation of the several “Brazils” - cosmopolitan/provincial, modern/archaic, liberal/oligarchic. At that same time, the country was changing “from an illiterate society to a society where the means of mass communication were already proliferating.”⁸

Cultural questions, which were personified in the collective imagination at that moment of transformations, were summarized in a question that became one of the main paradigms of the national historiography: *Since when has Brazil been a nation?*⁹

As a starting point to answer this question, we must analyze the imaginary concept of the period, focusing on how the theories formulated and advertised as scientific in Europe were adapted to the national context. *Ab initio* they should serve to explain the Brazilian reality.

Among these multiple theoretical streams, two have found fertile ground, attracting followers: the racialist theories, such as those of the French diplomat and author Arthur de Gobineau (1816-1882), and the evolutionism of the English philosopher Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), and the positivistic thought developed in the theories of the sociologist August Comte (1798-1857), Gobineau’s compatriot. The first two had their stronghold in part of the emerging national *intelligentsia*: physicians and bachelors, who were propagating and transforming agents; the third stream was endorsed by part of the Republicans and by a young section of the Brazilian Army, known as the “military youth,” formed by the Military School of Praia Vermelha, in Rio de Janeiro. This third group based themselves on the Scientificism rules and in the ideals of “discipline, order and progress,” which should mold the new country being born after the proclamation of the Republic. Since the decade of the 1860s, the colleges of the federal capital, especially in their Engineering and Mathematics courses, followed the positivistic philosophy used by many teachers as the “logical explanation from science to society.”¹⁰

From the end of the 19th century until the beginning of the First World War, the French influence could be seen in the customs, ideas, way of life and literature in Brazil. The *Belle Époque* in the country was mainly propagated via the French bookstores (such as the famous Garraux bookstore in São Paulo), which, for a considerable amount of time, was a meeting point for Brazilian authors. Therefore, the intense contact with the thoughts of Spencer, Gobineau and Comte caused the ideas of the evolutionism, social Darwinism, positivism and materialism to dominate the scientific area. These theories conquered the Brazilian intellectual and political elites.¹¹

8 SALIBA, Elias T. op. cit. p. 36.

9 Ibidem. p. 34.

10 SKIDMORE, Thomas. *Preto no Branco: raça e nacionalidade no pensamento brasileiro [BLACK INTO WHITE: RACE AND NATIONALITY IN BRAZILIAN THOUGHT]*. Rio de Janeiro, Paz e Terra, 1989. p. 28.

11 MASSI, Fernanda P. “Franceses e Norte-Americanos nas Ciências Sociais Brasileiras (1930-1960)” [FRENCH AND NORTH AMERICANS IN THE BRAZILIAN SOCIAL SCIENCES]. In: MICELI, Sérgio (org.) *História das Ciências Sociais no Brasil, vol. 1 [HISTORY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES IN BRAZIL]*. São Paulo, Vértice/FINEP/IDESB, 1989. p. 413.

In this dynamic historic context, where creating and releasing ideas was increasingly faster, the policies based on the racialist theorizations were noted even in Japan, which in the decade of the 1870s, was undergoing a process of “westernization”, led by the Meiji administration (1868-1912).

In the country of the cherry blossoms, groups of native politicians and intellectuals were divided into three segments: one, favorable to radical westernization; the other, to partial westernization; and a third one was the minority contrary to the process. Some radicals suggested that the Japanese language should be extinct and a foreign language should be adopted (German or English), as well as “renewing” the Japanese *inferior* genetic origin, through the miscegenation with the Western genetic origin, seen as *superior*.

In Brazil, the search for answers for our “nationality enigma” had as one of its *leitmotivs* the need to “forget” slavery and the subtraction of everything which was not native. In accordance with professor and literary critic Roberto Schwarz, the residue “in this subtracting operation would be the authentic substance of the country.”¹²

An example of this mentality towards “the other” may be seen in relation to the debates regarding the arrival of the yellow immigrant (initially the Chinese) between the years 1878/1879, which, instead of “subtracting,” would come to “add.” To add *negative* characteristics, as this element was not part of the “racial projections” of elevating Brazil to the same level of the “civilized nations.” These discourses may be identified in the newspapers, where articles against the Chinese were very common, condemning this type of immigration in the name of the *scientia* and alerting against a possible mongolization of the race. This was the theme of an essay written by the physician Costa Ferraz, “Mongolism threatens Brazil,” which, in 1879, used medical terms to alert the population about the dangers of having “mongolism inoculated”:

(...) the statement of the greatest indignation against the criminal invasion that our country is willing to accept, of a race in which moral degradation is accentuated in its secular habits and stands out as one of its most noticeable characteristics.¹³

Inserted in this “scientific” discourse we find another element, now of a cultural nature: the *defamiliarization* sensation regarding the yellow element (Chinese), which was not part of the Brazilian reality. At a time when the intention was to start “to build the Brazilian nation,” this was regarded as sacrilege. Did anyone remember the unsuccessful experiment when Chinese workers were brought to Rio de Janeiro to plant tea on the Santa Cruz Farm in 1814?

12 SCHWARZ, Roberto. “Nacional por subtração” [NATIONAL BY SUBTRACTION]. *Que horas são? Ensaios [WHAT TIME IS IT? – ESSAYS]*. São Paulo, Cia. Das Letras, 1997. p. 33.

13 FERRAZ, Costa. “O Mongolismo ameaça o Brasil” [MONGOLISM THREATENS BRAZIL]. *Annaes Brasilienses de Medicina [BRAZILIAN MEDICAL ANNALS]*. t. XXXI, n. 2. Rio de Janeiro, 1879. Biblioteca da Faculdade de Medicina – USP.

Another intellectual that saw in the *scientia* the true answer to Brazil's problems was Miguel Lemos, president of the Positivist Center of Rio de Janeiro. He wrote a message to the Chinese ambassador in France and England, in 1881, expressing his concern regarding the intentions of the diplomat Salvador de Mendonça and the government of D. Peter II to start a Chinese migration stream. In the words of the positivist, such a promotion was contrary to the indications of the truly scientific politics and morals: "We should expect that the Emperor of China's wisdom would neutralize the imprudence of our government, refusing to sign any agreement with the government of Rio."¹⁴

In the view of the Brazilian positivists, the theory of races systematized by some European theorists (Spencer, Gobineau, and Lapouge) was, in reality, very perverse and a great lie. Some would even say that it was mere "practical and theoretical vandalisms," being necessary to have "a scientific and honest intervention" so that it could be correctly studied.¹⁵

We noted in the examples above that the debates about nation and nationality were not unanimous. Thus, by compartmentalizing the Brazilian intellectuals into profiles linked only "to the positivist theories," "to the evolutionist theories" or "to the liberal theories," we face the risk of oversimplifying the complex picture of the Brazilian naturalistic thought. Some authors of the period may or may not be directly linked to the theories mentioned above. The amalgam of these theories in contact with the Brazilian reality through this emerging *intelligentsia* resulted in setting the tone for the national thought formulated and released during the *Belle Époque*. Therefore, we see that the naturalistic conception in Brazil has not always produced a discourse that was adjustable to the reality they wanted to explain and understand.

In this complex reality, we must consider that a nation must rise from the "forgetfulness" of certain aspects of its past. According to the historian José Murilo de Carvalho:

Identity is built with several ingredients, usually full of emotional components. Building these identities requires "forgetfulness" and "historic error," as Ernest Renan stressed in his famous conference in 1882 (...).¹⁶

14 LEMOS, Miguel. *Immigração Chinesa: Mensagem a Sua Excelência o Embaixador do Celeste Império junto aos Governos da França e da Inglaterra* [CHINESE IMMIGRATION: MESSAGE TO HIS EXCELLENCY THE AMBASSADOR OF THE CELESTIAL EMPIRE TO THE GOVERNMENTS OF FRANCE AND ENGLAND]. Publicação do Centro Positivista Brasileiro. Rio de Janeiro, 1881, p. 15-6.

15 Ibidem. p. 4.

16 CARVALHO, José Murilo de. "Terra do nunca: sonhos que não se realizam" [NEVERLAND: DREAMS COME UNTRUE]. In: BETHELL, Leslie (Org.) *Brasil: fardo do passado, promessa do futuro* [BRAZIL: A BURDEN FROM THE PAST, PROMISE OF THE FUTURE]. Tradução de Maria Beatriz de Medina. Rio de Janeiro, Civilização Brasileira, 2002, p. 47.

As an initial step for the consolidation of a *Brazilian state*, it became necessary to differentiate Brazil (“us”) from Portugal (“the others”). After Independence, during the decades of 1840-1850, in the period known as romantic, several discourses were prepared, initially based on a physical description of the country, always seen as a beautiful and paradisiacal place (Edenic vision). Later on, discourses *evolved* – to use a term very much in fashion at the time – to a description of the people still under formation, where the Indian became our medieval element *par excellence*. In the decades of 1870-1880, in order to build a *Nation*, the first attempts emerge to describe the Brazilian society, which should be “civilized,” *eliminating* the social differences by means of political decisions and, especially, eugenic actions.

We can state that, in that in the context of the *Belle Époque*, the recently formed Brazilian *intelligentsia* was unable to create its own theoretical models, explaining the reality “seen” by them and, in most cases, experienced from a distance. Therefore, the theories imported from Europe were the “cornerstone” for the theories developed in Brazil, but had little or nothing to do with the national reality at the time.

In 1897, in the eyes of the literary critic Silvio Romero (1851-1914), the country had “exotic literature and politics, which lives and procreates in a greenhouse, without relating to the exterior environment and temperature.”¹⁷ Still according to the author, there was a *cultural* gap between a Europeanized minority and an ignorant majority. This contrast was due to the “imitation skill from mixed races and people from the South, little skilled for creation.”¹⁸ I.e., for Romero, the fact that Brazilians were mere copycats of other theories was due to *race* rather than *social class*, as it was not the lower classes that “imported and copied” the European theoretical models, but the educated elite, who, due to their inability to create their own and comprehensive cultural model, preferred, in a (un?)conscious manner to blame the Brazilian backwardness and lack of originality, using racialist theories produced in the Old World and which were adapted to the Brazilian “reality” as biased by the dominating elites.

According to the historian Sérgio Buarque de Holanda (1902-1982), as the Brazilian theories were copied and adapted from those from Europe, when they were faced with a totally diverse reality from that which they had been originally formulated, the following could be noticed: “the same formulas and words [*of these copies and adaptations*] are the same, though their content and meaning adopted here are different.”¹⁹

17 SCHWARZ, Roberto. op. cit., p. 41.

18 Idem.

19 HOLANDA, Sérgio Buarque de. “Do Império à República” [*FROM EMPIRE TO REPUBLIC*]. t. 2, v. 5. In: *História Geral da Civilização Brasileira* [*GENERAL HISTORY OF BRAZILIAN CIVILIZATION*]. São Paulo, Difel, 1977, p. 77-8.

As a plausible answer to the afflictive feeling and the racialist nature of Silvio Romero's words in the passage from the 19th to the 20th century, Schwarz states that:

(...) the affliction of the civilization being imitated is not produced by the imitation, present in any case, but by the country's social structure, which puts the culture in an unbearable position, contradictory to its own self-concept, and that however, at the time was not as sterile as Silvio's arguments make you believe.²⁰

Therefore, a repetitive, and even “annoying,” formula was consolidated, one that will guide the national thought from the implementation of the Republican State until the middle of the decade of 1910. A second period (under the influence of a nationalist thought) will extend until the period of the Second World War (1939-1945), based on the idea that:

Born from the imaginary of the “other,” first a name and then a reality, Brazil, for the native intellectuals, seems to be always at a narrow escape, and maybe this generates the constantly renewed need to verify it.²¹

2. The emerging national intelligentsia: identity crisis or utopian racialism?

This period, when theories and ideas seemed to be “out of place”²², in accordance with the historian Emília Viotti da Costa, consolidated the figure of the *bachelor*, which started to be disseminated in the last three decades of the 19th century: the agent who formed the national *intelligentsia*. In the city, the bachelor used to be the representative of the farmer,²³ the owner of the latifundium and manipulator of the forces in power. Anyway, the “new” – the urban professional, the bachelor – continued to be linked to the “old” – the rural oligarch – directly influencing the formulation of most of the national *intelligentsia*’s discourses. It is important to remember that part of these intellectuals of the period came from families whose activities were or had been essentially agrarian: Silvio Romero, Joaquim Nabuco, Oliveira Lima, amongst others. These bachelors criticized the latifundium and slavery, though at the same time they depended on the oligarchies that they wanted

20 SCHWARZ, Roberto. op. cit., p. 46.

21 PONTES, Heloísa. “Retratos do Brasil: editores, editoras e ‘Coleção Brasiliiana’ nas décadas de 30, 40 e 50” [PORTRAITS OF BRAZIL: EDITORS, PUBLISHERS AND ‘BRAZILIAN COLLECTION’ IN THE DECADES OF 30, 40 AND 50]. In: MICELI, Sérgio (org.). op. cit., p. 364.

22 Ver a obra de SCHWARZ, Roberto. *Ao vencedor as batatas [TO THE WINNER, POTATOES]*. São Paulo, Duas cidades, 1979.

23 COSTA, Emilia Viotti da. Da Monarquia a República [FROM MONARCHY TO REPUBLIC]. São Paulo, Edunesp, 1998. p.262.

to fight, occupying public offices for which they were appointed with the interference of elements of that same oligarchy.²⁴ Part of this emerging Brazilian *intelligentsia* performed State functions, directly linked to the magistracy, and the mid-level bureaucracy, being part of the civil service. Therefore, the Brazilian authors did not have to face the chronic absence of readers for their works, as most of the population was semi-illiterate or illiterate. The fact that the intellectuals depended on the State caused a large part of them, initially, to adopt a “non-critical” attitude in relation to the recently implemented Republican model.

Still, in the scope of the “ideas out of place,” the intense modernization of the cities, starting at the end of the 19th century, created certain ambiguities in the (still) rarefied national thought, as several of these intellectuals identified with the “urban” could not, at first, decipher their own reality, where the oligarchies were still in power. The inexistence of “projects for Brazil” comes from the ambiguous reality lived by these thinkers, who talked about the country. As a consequence, these intellectuals:

(...) got involved with European literature, European fashions, be they philosophical or political. In this sense, the city for them would have an alienating effect. Even when aware of the distance between theory and practice, between the city and the fields, they went after the European interpretative models to explain what seemed to them to be the “anomaly” of the Brazilian reality, finding in the racist theses of Gobineau and Lapouge or in the deterministic doctrines of Ratzel the explanation that they were not able to find when analyzing the Brazilian reality.²⁵

Therefore, in accordance with Viotti, the intellectuals, as at that time they were directly or indirectly linked to the oligarchies, “were limited to interpret the point of view of the more progressist sectors” and, when overcoming these limitations became “unable to formalize other types of alliances and their radicalism is extinguished in a verbalism of little efficiency.” Models of this affirmation may be seen in the speeches given during the Agricultural Congress of 1878 and the following year in the debates regarding Chinese immigration in the Senate and in the Assembly of São Paulo. It is in this universe, marked by the lack of originality in the discourses about the “directions of the country,” with a distance between those who produce the spoken and written discourse (the elites) and those who should be the recipient of that (the population), that we find the figure of the Brazilian intellectual at the *fin de siècle*.

Using an educated, elaborated, difficult and sometimes prolix language, as their main “work instrument,” this alleged trendsetter wanted to show how erudite he was within his own relationships,

24 Ibidem, p. 263.

25 Idem.

and his style was recognized as the *mark of a doctor*.²⁶

The archaic/modern reflection of the rarefied airs of the national *Belle Époque* transited under this elitist mindset. In search for solutions, the elite, while appealing to the yellow-skinned emigrant, used “strong colors” to fuel the debates regarding the problems of the national plantation (coffee). The “progress” for these bachelors was in the continuation of a process experienced by their grandparents and parents which was called into question, more specifically by the Law of the Free Womb. Being extremely conservative, the representatives of the agrarian aristocracy, on their turn, shared the same idea: no radical changes should be implemented, but only small “conjunctural modifications,” so that the social order would not take a different course. Evaluating this posture founded on maintaining the *status quo* in a dynamic period of historic transformations, we remember the aristocratic figure of Don Fabrizio Salina, in the immortal masterpiece *The Leopard*, by the Italian writer Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, published in 1958. The noble Don Fabrizio, living in an universe of radical transformations during the process of the Italian unification in the decade of 1860, states with incredible clarity that, *if we want things to stay as they are*, i.e., without changes, *things have to change*.²⁷ A lapidary phrase that summarizes a period of transformations where, for better or for worse, the monarchic Brazil and its elite were inserted.

It is important to highlight that, on top of these discourses produced by the “thinking” national elite, who felt as if they were “preaching in the desert,” strong elements of popular culture from oral tradition and the imagination of the middle and lower classes of the Brazilian population were also circulating. These classes were, up until that moment, despised by the elite who “only” saw what we can call as the *Legal Brazil* – a country being developed, a “new” country. Elements of the *Actual Brazil* were relegated to the background, such as black slavery, which should be “forgotten.” Regarding the evolution of this model of political relations, the English historian Eric J. Hobsbaw notices that:

(...) the social order faced danger from the moment when the ‘actual country’ started penetrating the closed area of the ‘legal country’, or political country, which was defended by protecting property, imposing educational qualifications for voting and, in most countries, by the institutionalized aristocratic privileges, such as hereditary chambers.²⁸

26 LIMA, Luís C. *Dispersa demanda ensaios sobre literatura e teoria [DIFUSE DEMAND: ESSAYS ON LITERATURE AND THEORY]*. Rio de Janeiro, Livraria Francisco Alves, 1981, p. 10.

27 LAMPEDUSA, Giuseppe Tomasi di. *O leopardo [THE LEOPARD]*. São Paulo; Nova Cultural, 2002.

28 HOBSBAW, Eric J. *A Era dos Impérios (1875-1914) [THE AGE OF EMPIRE (1875-1914)]*. Rio de Janeiro; Paz e Terra, 1998. p. 126.

The emerging Brazilian *intelligentsia* had to be initially in tune with the *Belle Époque* world and its transformations, as well as adapting/transforming the country by “forgetting” certain elements that formed our nationality. As we have already mentioned, many of those who could change the country, were unable to understand it...

A time of cultural rarefaction is experienced in Brazil, motivated by the lack of consumers of culture and a feedback that would allow, at least, some “debates.” This was due to a singular process which occurred in the formation of the incipient public opinion, as it rose simultaneously to the emergence of a cultural market.

This “lack of public” may be explained as a legacy from colonial times, when the dominance of the oral culture was structured. Professor Luiz Costa Lima, a Literary Theory professor at PUC University in Rio de Janeiro named this *auditory culture*, as its vehicles were mainly the pulpit (ecclesiastic preaching) and the speech platforms. It was mostly conformed and disseminated by the *impact* on the recipient, as the “hearing culture is mainly a culture of persuasion, not understanding.”

Still according to Costa Lima:

The auditory culture is, therefore, a culture which is essentially transmitted without demonstrative chains. Going from *a* to *y*, without the participants noticing or questioning or being interested in questioning the absence of links.²⁹

The main result of this cultural inheritance is the development of a *lack of critical sense* in the heart of the national public opinion that was being formed. When we evaluate the *fin-de-siècle* Brazil under Gobineau’s racialist discourse, we notice a “backward” country, formed by a weak race and going through a degenerative process.³⁰ For the Brazilian intellectuals who endorsed several theories imported from Europe, a solution was urgently needed to interrupt and revert this degradation process. This realization generated an “identity crisis” based on ideals of “utopian racialism” in the heart of the *modus pensanti* of the intellectuals of the time in Brazil. For the sociologist Renato Ortiz, it became necessary to explain the Brazilian ‘backwardness’ and point to a future:

(...) the possibility of Brazil becoming a people, i.e., a Nation. The dilemma of the intellectuals of this time is to understand the gap between theory and reality, which is noticed in the construction of the

29 LIMA, Luís C. op. cit., p. 17.

30 For Gobineau, “the cross-breeding is destined, here and anywhere else, to debilitate the race: the Brazilians would soon be condemned to disappear. Based on a so-called probability calculation, Gobineau even predicts the date of the collective death certificate of the Brazilian race: within 270 years”. Ibidem, p. 11.

national identity.³¹

The main arguments were centered around two basic notions: *environment* and *race*.³² Under this view of a social-anthropological analysis, amongst other authors we highlight the journalist and writer Euclides da Cunha (1866-1909), from Rio de Janeiro, author of the seminal work *Os Sertões* (1902, “*Rebellion in the Backlands*”), and the literary critic from Sergipe, Silvio Romero (1851-1914), whose problematic of race stood out the most in the national scenario. For the author of *History of Brazilian Literature* (1888), the racial question is the “fundamental basis of all history, politics, social structure, aesthetic and moral life of the Nations”.³³

For Nina Rodrigues (1862-1906), a mulatto physician born in Bahia, the theory of race hierarchization aimed to show that “the superior races are different from the inferior ones.” For the author of *The Human Races and Penal Responsibility in Brazil* (1894):

In interracial contact and social competition the superior race is the winner (...). History is characterized by a slow and gradual improvement in the psychic, moral and intellectual activity.³⁴

Rodrigues also postulated a creation of two penal codes in our legislation: One for black people (seen as *inferior* in the European evolutionary scale) and the other for white people (seen as *superior* in the same scale).

Therefore, we can see that it was from a “European point of view” that most of the emerging Brazilian intellectuality tried to distinguish the national identity, i.e., by focusing on the *miscegenation issue* - not white, nor black, nor native Indian. The reality of the mixed race people surfaces at a time when significant social and intellectual transformations were occurring in Brazil. In this context, the impossibility of finding immediate answers for this question transformed the crossbred people into the symbolic figure of *inferiority* and *backwardness*:

(...) the moral, intellectual and racial miscegenation of the Brazilian people can only exist as a possibility. The national ideal, in reality, is a utopia to be achieved in the future, i.e., in the whitening process of the Brazilian society. The stigma of the “inferior races” may be eliminated via the social evolution chain, which politically puts the construction of a National State as an objective, and not as a present reality.³⁵

31 ORTIZ, Renato. *Cultura brasileira e identidade nacional [BRAZILIAN CULTURE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY]*. 5. Ed. São Paulo, Brasiliense, 1985. p. 15.

32 Idem.

33 ROMERO, Silvio. op. cit., p. 317.

34 ORTIZ, Renato. op. cit., p. 20.

35 Ibidem, p. 21.

Another example of the influence and the persistence of the racialist theories in formulating the discourses regarding the national situation in the Brazilian *Belle Époque* may be identified in the affirmations of the historian and author João Ribeiro, born in Sergipe, in his work *History of Brazil*, a publication that we would nowadays classify as a textbook. First published in 1901, it was aimed at the “superior courses” (currently the equivalent of Secondary School). This segment refers to the *miscegenated races* (mestizo, mixed-races, crossbred people) as the builders of Latin America:

(...) they lack the feeling that those ideas presuppose and the moral virtues and qualities that, contrary to the theories, only the secular education of history manages to pour into the human spirit (...). They do not know how to govern, nor how to be governed (...).

The only remedy for these people is the same as the old colonization, the continuous population and the European immigration (even if in a wrong way, as in Nobrega’s time) who works in the offices and plough the fields, inoculating life and coordinating the disarray and, as Thomé de Souza used to say, does not charge from the Treasury.³⁶

A solution for the future was looked for in “some elements” of history. Besides the question of miscegenation, we can also notice a cultural explanation for the situation of “disarray” and the incapacity of the crossbred person to acquire the basic attributes to prosper, e.g. *lack of discipline*.

In this universe of debates regarding *race* and the *Brazilian Nation* to be (re)formed, some intellectuals thought, or more accurately, analyzed it rather differently, based on what was being debated. Among them, we have the young congressional representative Joaquim Nabuco (1849-1910), from Pernambuco, and the (already famous) writer Machado de Assis (1839-1908), from Rio de Janeiro.

In order to give his opinion regarding the project of having Chinese immigrants work in the fields, Machado, always alert “to everything and everyone,” on October 23rd, 1883, transcribed in his chronicle *Balas de Estalo* (“*The Sound of Bullets*”), a letter from the Viceroy of India to the English Count Granville, Secretary of State of Foreign Affairs, originally published in English in the *London Gazette*. In this document, we identify (with sarcasm) information regarding the situation of the Asian worker (*chim*/Chinese) in India, and a rather “curious” comparison:

At first, I must remind Your Excellency that one needs to distinguish the *chim* from the *chim*. The

36 RIBEIRO, João. *História do Brasil [HISTORY OF BRAZIL]*. Rio de Janeiro, Livraria Francisco Alves, 1912.

37 ASSIS, Machado de. “Balas de Estalo” [*THE SOUND OF BULLETS*]. In: COUTINHO, Afrânia (org.). Machado de Assis: Obra Completa [*MACHADO DE ASSIS: COMPLETE WORKS*]. Rio de Janeiro; Nova Aguilar, 1994, v. III, p. 420-422.

common *chim* is very much abandoned throughout Asia, where it was superseded by a variety of *chim* that is far superior to the other one. This variety, as I already had the opportunity to tell His Majesty's administration, is the chimpanzee.³⁷

Hovering above immigrationist and abolitionist interests, Machado de Assis used the content of this letter to, ironically, criticize supporters in favor and against Chinese immigration, "agreeing" with the Indian Viceroy when presenting the chimpanzee (!) as an alternative to black people. In his opinion, those who were favoring the *chim*, would have in the chimpanzee "more economic" merchandise with the "same capabilities" of the "other one". For those who were against Chinese immigration, fearing the "bastardization of the race," on the other hand, see their argument being invalidated, as the chimpanzee would not "mate" with the races in the country, already *negatively* crossbred, so, as Machado says: "bring on the chimpanzee..."!³⁸

Ironies aside, we notice that, on top of being printed, the racialist works of Gobineau, Lapouge, Renan and other European theorists, were starting to be discussed in the medical journals in Brazil, such as *Gazeta Medica da Bahia*, of 1865, and, later, in *Brazil Medico*, of 1887, published in Rio de Janeiro. Those were, besides Recife, the main centers debating issues regarding race and eugenics. At the end of the 19th century, Brazilian medicine took upon itself the mission of "saving the Brazilian race," presenting itself as the "guardian of the society, sanitizer of the nationality, absolute owner of the destinations and the future."³⁹

Based on these racialist discourses and in the social Darwinism theory, the physicians Nina Rodrigues, in Bahia, and Miguel Pereira (1871-1918), in Rio de Janeiro, tried to formulate a Brazilian science (*scientia à brasileira*) to solve the national problems. For these men of science, the motto "Equality, Freedom and Fraternity" had no scientific basis; therefore, the political physician was the one who had to assume the "defense of the race, eugenics and, consequently, society."⁴⁰

Soon after, we noticed that, in the case of medicine, theory made practice a lot *easier*, and the "Gordian knot" faced by the nation's intellectuals was probably going to become, on the view of the "medical knowledge", one *simple* tie. The emergence of new players in the intellectual field gave the debates regarding the race issue in Brazil a second wind. The bachelor was no longer alone...

38 Idem.

39 SCHWARCZ, Lilian M. *O espetáculo das raças: cientistas instituições e questão racial no Brasil (1870-1930)* [THE SPECTACLE OF THE RACES: SCIENTISTS, INSTITUTIONS AND THE RACE QUESTION IN BRAZIL (1870-1930)]. São Paulo, Cia. Das Letras, 1993. p. 202.

40 Ibidem, p. 211.

Final Considerations

It was realized that the project to create a *national historic race*, which was so longed for, could not be achieved with a moment's notice. Becoming aware of that, the national *intelligentsia* started to formulate new theoretical routes, in order to achieve answers for the situation in the country. Therefore, the construction of the Brazilian National State was idyllically developed as a *slow and constant* process that, only after the decade of 1930, was effectively put into practice (*praxis*). Countless intellectuals made an effort to define the Brazilian national character: for the poet Olavo Bilac (1865-1918), from Rio de Janeiro, we were a “loving flower of three sad races;” for the sociologist Gilberto Freyre (1900-1987), from Pernambuco, a “festive racial democracy.”

Overall, while trying to build the image of a National State, the emerging Brazilian intellectuality had a long road to travel, and several factors had a direct impact on the direction that was guiding the native thought. Among these factors, one of the most important was the issue of immigration. Having immigrants coming in with the aim of catalyzing the Brazilian race’s “whitening” process brought new horizons, increasingly more different from what had been initially intended by the intellectuals of the time.

Instead of producing innovative references about their time, the pioneers of national thought, *a posteriori* identified as the *1870 Generation*, were mostly a product of their time. The pessimism regarding the future of the *Brazilian race*, the conscience split between the national and foreign reality of the period (1870-1914), prevented this emerging *fin-de-siècle* intelligentsia from standing on its own two feet.

Vestiges of this formation period of a first generation of Brazilian intellectuals may still be felt in the present, as stressed by Roberto Schwarz, as we still suffer of a *cultural torticollis*: when in doubt about any work, theory or person, we always “look around” to see what the foreigner (“the other”) said or may say about the theme.

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(2011.06.02 受理)